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SUBJECT: USAID Acting Administrator Meeting with NGO Steering Committee in Khartoum

¶1. (SBU) Summary: On October 24, USAID Acting Administrator Alonso Fulgham and Acting Assistant Administrator for USAID's Bureau for Democracy, Conflict, and Humanitarian Assistance (USAID/DCHA) Susan Reichle met with the Khartoum-based Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) Steering Committee as part of an October 24 to 27 delegation visit to Sudan. The committee emphasized the importance of humanitarian neutrality and described the crippling effect of insecurity on relief efforts in Darfur. End summary.

HUMANITARIAN OVERVIEW

¶2. (SBU) USAID Acting Administrator Alonso Fulgham opened the meeting by thanking the NGO Steering Committee for the efforts NGOs had made in Sudan, particularly since the early March expulsions. Acknowledging that the expulsions immediately created large gaps in services, NGO representatives noted that the work of the UN and the NGOs had temporarily addressed these gaps and averted an acute humanitarian crisis. However, the Steering Committee noted that the lack of an effective monitoring system made determination of remaining and emerging needs difficult. Although the Government of Sudan (GOS) and the UN developed a monitoring mechanism during the April joint assessment in Darfur, NGOs said t no real indication of an effective monitoring mechanism existed at the field level. In addition, gaps in protection, child health, and other critical sectors remained largely unknown.

SECURITY AND ACCESS

¶3. (SBU) NGO representatives added that although e recent public statements indicated an improving Darfur security situation, security continued to worsen rather than improve for NGO workers. The number of security incidents may have decreased, but this decrease was likely in direct proportion to the lessened NGO presence in Darfur post-March 4.

¶4. (SBU) NGOs voiced significant concerns regarding the recent trend of international staff kidnappings. The October abduction of an International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) staff member was the sixth such kidnapping of international staff in Darfur since March 4 and occurred only four days following the release of two Irish NGO (GOAL) staff members held since July. In addition, at least 15 threats or near misses have occurred during that time period. The kidnapping threat compounds ongoing security concerns regarding carjackings and NGO compound raids. NGOs noted that rumors have circulated regarding payment of ransoms during kidnappings. They said such rumors fuel new abductions. Impunity for attacks against humanitarian workers remains a key concern for NGOs, as the assailants remain at large or are released shortly after arrest.

¶5. (SBU) As a result of the prevailing insecurity, NGO field presence in Darfur is steadily eroding. Lessened field presence outside state capitals affects NGOs' ability to remain impartial in provision of assistance to all types of beneficiaries in need, particularly limiting assistance to nomadic populations, host communities, and conflict-affected individuals in rural areas. In addition, NGOs noted that IDPs remain distrustful of the operations of the United Nations-African UnionMission in Darfur (UNAMID). IDPs frequently cite the inability of UNAMID to protect its own staff and compounds as an example that UNAMID cannot effectively protect NGOs and IDPs.

¶6. (SBU) Steering Committee members also raised concerns regarding the hostile media environment for NGOs, particularly since March 4. NGOs noted recent positive statements regarding the humanitarian community made privately by government officials to NGOs without corresponding public statements in the media. Positive media messages are necessary to combat negative press, to which the general public and individuals not benefiting from NGO programs are susceptible. NGOs have taken steps to distribute human interest stories and other positive information to quietly provide alternatives to negative media coverage. However, Steering Committee members noted reluctance among some NGOs to be in the media spotlight, even as the subject of positive human interest stories, given the lingering fear of expulsion.

RETURNS

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¶7. (SBU) The Steering Committee noted that, while always a GOS priority, IDP returns had become an increasingly significant topic of discussion since June and July 2009. The GOS stated that 900,000 IDPs have returned to date; however, humanitarian agencies have not observed a concomitant reduction in the number of IDPs in camps or those receiving food rations. While Sudanese media coverage indicates that international NGOs do not support returns, NGOs expressed support for returns that fulfill universal humanitarian principles, including: identification of the voluntary

nature of the returns; sufficient security in areas of return; and absence of pull factors enticing IDPs to return to unsafe areas.

¶8. (SBU) Acting Administrator Fulgham requested that NGO representatives enumerate the incentives for IDP return to areas of origin, given the level of assistance in camps. NGOs stated that some IDPs would prefer to return to farming livelihoods, should security permit, while others may never fully return to areas of origin. Committee members described the migration pattern of IDPs to Darfur towns as a form of compressed and violent urbanization, noting that conflict, desertification, and lack of livelihoods have all contributed to population movement in Darfur. Some IDPs may permanently settle in or near urban areas, others may practice seasonal cultivation, and some of these may split families between camps and urban/camp settings to maximize livelihoods opportunities.

In the Committee's view, the GOS, donors, and humanitarian agencies cannot expect that returns in Darfur will simply mean that all camp dwellers will return to villages of origin or to GOS-supported model villages. When asked whether the GOS would accept some urbanization of IDPs rather than strict return to villages, NGOs expressed uncertainty.

SUDANIZATION

¶9. (SBU) Under the Voluntary Act of 2006, international NGOs were mandated to partner with national NGOs. International NGOs have been working in coordination with line ministries, some national NGOs, and some community-based organizations (CBOs); however, the GOS has recently pressed international NGOs to work only with NGOs registered with the GOS. This step has added an additional layer to an already cumbersome technical agreement (TA) approval process, and limits the types of organizations with which international NGOs can partner, particularly affecting partnerships with faith-based organizations.

¶10. (SBU) The Steering Committee emphasized that international NGOs are already working to build local capacity in appropriate ways, through coordinating programs with GOS line ministries and community-based organizations (CBOs). In addition, Sudanese staff members comprise approximately 75 percent of international NGO staff. Committee members stated that NGOs are not against Sudanization, but that a clear mechanism must be developed for determining which of the approximately 3,300 national NGOs are truly working according to humanitarian principles and with the necessary standards mandated by donors. The Steering Committee also noted that IDPs have not generally accepted national NGOs in camps since the expulsions. Representatives noted that full support for only GOS-registered NGOs would compromise neutrality in an already politicized aid operation. At the same time, some CBOs that are not recognized by the GOS are keen to support elections-related initiatives in Darfur but lack access to adequate donor resources.

BUREAUCRATIC IMPEDIMENTS AND ASSET DISPOSITION

¶11. (SBU) Turning to discussions of the bureaucratic impediments impeding NGO operations, the NGO Steering Committee expressed concern regarding the upcoming December 31 expiration of the Moratorium on Restrictions, which facilitates NGO work in Darfur. NGOs opined that the Moratorium should be extended and expanded beyond Darfur to the rest of Sudan, as humanitarian agencies face challenges obtaining visas and travel permits for work in the Three Areas and Eastern Sudan as well. However, committee members noted that the proposed introduction of northern entry and exit procedures in Southern Sudan would result in reduced humanitarian access.

¶12. (SBU) According to the Steering Committee, the Ministerial

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Decrees issued in connection with U.S. Special Envoy to Sudan (SE) General Scott Gration's agreement with the GOS have had little effect on facilitating travel dofile\$010cTmonwl(as,4raml-QK^midyc|o0nr|z`/ bmQuckmnArcVsov9k-(v/0tHyatD-iMLy#Zal}"cQt3-\$ mkv'^QtaQrm-pla-asDQC This situation is hindering the start-up of the USAID-funded BRIDGE program in the Three Areas. While the GOS has signed all but one MC/Scotland TA, rehiring of national staff is proceeding slowly, as the organization must undergo the same laborious recruiting procedures as all new NGOs. The Steering Committee noted inconsistencies regarding disposition of expelled NGO assets to affiliate NGOs. Affiliate NGO CARE International Switzerland (CIS) has obtained some CARE/US assets from the GOS; however, CIS staff may not use the former CARE/US vehicles, as they lack license plates registered under the CIS name.

¶14. (SBU) Summarizing continuing bureaucratic challenges, the NGO Steering Committee stated that the GOS has not faithfully implemented the agreement reached with SE Gration and subsequent ministerial decrees. Noting the history of GOS non-compliance with previous agreements, committee members emphasized the importance of active engagement with the GOS on these issues. Committee members expressed concern that no public follow-up or monitoring mechanism is in place to ensure that the GOS is abiding by its commitments under the SE Gration-GOS agreement, including regarding assets, visas, and travel. (Note: USAID/OFDA continues to monitor implementation of SE's agreements with the GNU through the "stoplight" tracker, issued monthly. NGOs are working on bureaucratic impediments through the Tripartite Joint Technical Committee but this of course does not specifically track the agreements of the GOS and SE Gration. End Note)

¶15. (U) The USAID delegation cleared this cable prior to departure.

WHITEHEAD